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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT RESPONDS TO TAYLOR,S ACCUSATIONS IN
INDEPENDENCE DAY DOMINATED BY RECONCILIATION THEME

REF: A) MONROVIA 532 B) MONROVIA 487 C) MONROVIA 165
D) MONROVIA 125

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Classified By: Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield for reasons 1.4 (b) a
nd (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. Appeals for reconciliation in the wake of the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) report's release were amplified during events commemorating 162 years of independence. International visitors, including Equatorial Guinea President Teodoro Obiang and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Commission President Mohamed Ibn Chambas, echoed calls for Liberian cooperation and offered public support to President Sirleaf's government. Sirleaf finally broke her silence regarding the TRC recommendation that she be banned from public office and allegations by former President Charles Taylor that she was an active supporter of his rebellion. In her Independence Day speech, Sirleaf explained that her silence resulted from legal advice that any comment could be seen as an attempt to influence legislative reaction to the report. Sirleaf also clarified her limited support to Taylor's movement and her succeeding open criticism of Taylor's brutal government. This strong reaction is another indication that President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf will likely seek re-election in 2011.
END SUMMARY

"LET'S BECOME ONE"

¶2. (U) "Kwaa Ker Tono" ("Let's Become One" in Kpelle) was the official theme of Liberia's July 26 Independence Day celebration. Repeated calls for reconciliation among Liberians by various speakers during weekend-long festivities were clearly a sustained reaction to the June 30 release of the TRC's final report and former President Charles Taylor's recent testimony at the Special Court for Sierra Leone in The Hague. Taylor identified President Sirleaf as a major fundraiser and supporter of his 1990s rebel movement.

¶3. (U) The final event, a celebration ceremony at the local administrative building in the interior host-city of Gbargna (a Taylor stronghold approximately 125 miles west of Monrovia), included the participation of Equatorial Guinea President Teodoro Obiang and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Commission President Mohamed Ibn Chambas as guest dignitaries. Speaking before the crowd, Obiang encouraged Liberians to reconcile their differences and respect the rule of law. Chambas called for reconstruction efforts to focus on the security sector and noted that current high levels of unemployment threaten the

country's stability. The two also praised the Sirleaf government's rapid reconstruction progress.

SIRLEAF RESPONDS TO TRC REPORT, TAYLOR ALLEGATIONS

¶4. (U) President Sirleaf began her official speech by highlighting accomplishments during her time in office, noting that Liberia's international reputation had been restored. After weeks of not responding to the TRC's recommendation that she be banned from public office for 30 years (Ref B), Sirleaf announced that she was advised that it was "legally imprudent" for her to comment on the report because this could be construed as an attempt to influence future legislative reaction to TRC recommendations. Sirleaf clarified that, while an early supporter of Charles Taylor, she became an "impassioned critic" and "strong opponent" of his regime when the "true nature of (his) intentions became known." She recalled her past expressions of remorse for this "misjudgment" and noted that the Liberian people had responded by electing her as president. Sirleaf closed her impassioned speech by reaffirming her commitment to rebuilding Liberia and belief in the "wisdom" of the public to "know the truth" and "desire to seek reconciliation."

SIGNS POINT TO SIRLEAF RE-ELECTION RUN (C/NF)

¶5. (C) Strong attendee response to the president's address, as well as her presence at the weekend's events, proves that she enjoys strong popularity among the general public. Many locals sported shirts with the president's portrait, which promoted the "Citizens United to Re-elect Ellen" (CURE) movement. This follows other recent calls for Sirleaf to contest the next presidential election despite a 2005 campaign pledge not to seek re-election. (Ref A)

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¶6. (C) COMMENT. The Independence Day calls for a focus on reconciliation following the TRC report's publication makes it appear that for now those who are calling for forgetting the past are holding sway over the debate on how to proceed with reconciliation. It may be a coincidence that the GOL chose Gbarnga for this year's celebrations (a different city is chosen each year) just as the Taylor trial is going on. Gbarnga was Taylor's stronghold in the first years of the civil war and his estranged wife Jewel Howard-Taylor is the local county's senior senator. Taylor has strong support in Gbarnga, especially from ex-combatants turned motorcycle taxi drivers, who occasionally stir up trouble. That the celebrations went without a hitch is an indication that the GOL was able to somehow keep that element from acting up. Sirleaf's non-reactionary, measured response to the TRC's recommendations and to Charles Taylor's accusations could be a calculated effort to show Liberians that she continues to be the best person for the job of guiding Liberia through its continuing recovery. END COMMENT.

THOMAS-GREENFIELD